DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 468 849 UD 035 272

AUTHOR	Lewis, Anne C.
TITLE	The Community Accountability Team in Louisville: Waking a Sleeping Giant.
SPONS AGENCY	Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, New York, NY.
PUB DATE	2002-08-00
NOTE	31p.; With dissenting commentary from Beverly Derington Moore and Sherry DeMarsh.
AVAILABLE FROM	The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, 250 Park Avenue, Suite 900, New York, NY 10177. Tel: 212-551-9100; Fax: 212-986-4558; e-mail: mhall@emcf.org; Web site: http://www.emcf.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; *Accountability; Black Students; Educational Quality; Leadership; Middle Schools; Minority Group Children; *Parent Participation; *School Community Relationship; School Districts; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS	*Achievement Gap; *Jefferson County Public Schools KY; Kentucky Education Reform Act 1990

ABSTRACT

This paper describes Louisville, Kentucky's Community Accountability Team (CAT), which promoted parent and citizen involvement in school reform. It was unique to the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS), a large, urban district, and represented a strategy in a rapidly building national movement to make education more transparent and accountable to those it serves. The 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act set the precedent for state action on accountability. Focusing on the middle grades, CAT produced a report to the community that noted the achievement gap between minority and white students, discussed high expectations for student achievement, and addressed two major barriers (student motivation and low expectations). CAT's continuing mobilization of public concern about academic achievement challenged the leadership of the JCPS. As various community groups grappled with the report's information, trust in school district leadership began to erode, and challenges to the leadership arose from the minority community. This paper includes two dissenting commentaries. The first suggests that the report presents misleading information about the JCPS' response to the achievement gap and that some information is incorrect. The second feels that the report portrays an incomplete, biased, and intentionally divisive summary of the work attempted by a group of people sincerely trying to make a positive difference in JCPS middle school achievement. (SM)

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ED 468 849

THE COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY TEAM IN LOUISVILLE:

WAKING A SLEEPING GIANT

by Anne C. Lewis

WITH DISSENTING COMMENTARY

from Beverly Derington Moore and Sherry DeMarsh

PREPARED FOR

THE Edna McConnell Clark FOUNDATION

AUGUST 2002

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"This takes a long, slow process of learning and moving in the right direction. But people are beginning to wake up and want change." - CAT staff member

The Community Accountability Team (CAT) of Louisville, Kentucky, plowed new ground in the field of parent and citizen involvement in school reform. In some ways, it was unique to its place—a large, urban district steeped in ways of the South. In a wider sense, however, CAT represented another strategy in a rapidly building national movement to make education more transparent and accountable to those it serves—families, communities and students themselves. As such, its evolution and lessons learned can enrich that movement.

CAT emerged as an outgrowth of more than eight years of grant support from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation to the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) aimed at making sure students in the middle grades were prepared for success in high school and beyond.[1] The funding included several strategies to create partnerships between the schools and families and the community. In these efforts, CAT was, so to speak, the "culminating activity" of the Foundation—an organization funded by Clark but independent of the district and outside its control.

[1] For more about the Foundation's long-term support for JCPS see http://www.middleweb.com/BIOtitlepg.html and http://www.middleweb.com/figuring.html and http://www.middleweb.com/Lvillereform.html .

What Led to CAT

The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 set a precedent for state—and now federal—action on accountability.[2] Required to redesign Kentucky's education system because of a court-ordered redress of school financing, state officials put in place statewide standards and assessments, rewarding high performance and intervening when school performance lagged behind. The law financed capacity building in multiple ways. Teachers helped develop the standards and received support to implement them. The state invested in leadership development, and parents became members of school-based decision making councils.

Fortunately, a strong effort to involve citizens in education preceded this massive transformation of the state education system. Since 1983, the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence had been mobilizing community support for significant improvements in K-12 education.[3] It kept citizen fire going while the legislature was drawing up KERA. The Committee followed passage of the Act with support for local citizen committees throughout the state as well as advocacy for appropriate policies, practices, and parent involvement.

A key component of the Prichard Committee's strategy to increase parent involvement was—and remains—the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership (CIPL).[4] It is based on previous, formal efforts to improve school-parent relationships.

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[2] For a summary of KERA, see http://www.pfks.org/edu/kera2.html.
[3] For more about the Prichard Committee, see http://www.prichardcommittee.org/.
[4] For more about CIPL, see http://www.cipl.org/.

"We have learned," says a Prichard Committee report, "that parental involvement occurs best when schools are receptive and when both parents and teachers have training about it." CIPL provides intensive training to help parents be informed partners with schools, able to interpret data and negotiate changes. Each CIPL participant also carries out a school-based improvement project, making visible to school people the commitment of parents to be helpful.

The flaw in this picture of unprecedented accountability and of parent and citizen activism is the community of Louisville.

Jefferson County Public Schools' "Uniqueness"

The Jefferson County Public Schools, a merged system of the city of Louisville and its surrounding county, is Kentucky's largest and most diverse school district, by far.[5] It enrolls 95,000 students, with many minority and low-income students attending inner-city schools. Half of Kentucky's African-American students attend JCPS schools. The "out-county" schools resemble most suburban enclaves—newer buildings, more homogeneous and predominantly white student bodies, and a perception of being comfortably middle class.

In order to maintain an approximate racial balance in the midst of housing segregation, the school district operates an elaborate busing system, moving some inner-city students to the outskirts and enabling other students to leave what would be their neighborhood schools to attend myriad magnet programs. In some instances, the district's gerrymandering of school zones has created pockets of severely disadvantaged schools.

[5] For more about JCPS, see http://www.jefferson.k12.ky.us/JCPS/Intro.html.

Even with yellow buses crisscrossing the district every day, many schools in the central city remain "different" from the rest. Yet, the façade of many out-county schools hides problems usually associated with the inner city. Most minority students attend central city schools (the district is one-third African-American and experiencing a rapid increase in English-as-a-second-language students). However, 60 percent of the district's students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, including one-third of white students. Half of the students live in single-parent households, including 42 percent of white students. In the past seven years, the number of homeless children has doubled, to more than 3,000. Obviously, most schools throughout the district face the same challenges; the difference is in the degree.

These demographics, JCPS officials contend, set the district apart from the rest of the state. Because of the special issues or a long tradition of feeling apart, JCPS finds various ways to be treated differently. For years it opposed participating in the state's education data-tracking system, MUNIS, saying its own system was better.[6] Last year, the JCPS school board finally ordered the superintendent to switch to the state framework. KERA also established regional service centers to support districts as they implemented the reforms. The centers often serve as "critical friends" to school systems and schools, able to make recommendations and provide advice as external consultants. JCPS, however, insisted on a different contract, making the regional services part of the district hierarchy and hiring the staff. JCPS was the last district in the state to adopt KERA's plan for school-based decision making councils. As a result, the councils in Louisville lag behind all others in the state in knowing how to disaggregate data and use

[6] For more about JCPS and MUNIS, see http://www.courier-journal.com/localnews/2001/12/05/ke120501s116493.htm.

it for school improvement (one task of the regional centers is to train school councils on using the data).

It is on the issue of accountability, however, where JCPS's claim of "different" is most troublesome. Despite the state's unwavering commitment to forward movement among all sub-groups of students in each of the state's schools, JCPS has tolerated a significant academic achievement gap between white and black students. Its scores on the Commonwealth Accountability Testing Systems (CATS)[7] are improving, but the gap is still large. According to the 2001 scores, only 14 percent of white middle grades students remain in the lowest (novice) level on reading, compared to 31 percent of African-American students. In math, 33 percent of white students were at the novice level compared to 66 percent of African-American students.

The lowest performing middle school in the state accountability index has been and remains a JCPS school. The school system's top-scoring middle school is 16.4 points behind the top-scoring one in Kentucky, and the average score of all JCPS middle schools is almost 6 points lower than the state average. State officials point out that school districts in other parts of the state with higher levels of poverty have made greater progress than Louisville. The 20 top-scoring middle schools on the state's reading assessment, for example, included three schools where more than half of the students are in the free and reduced lunch program.

Still, using SES data, the JCPS superintendent at one point argued for lower accountability expectations than set by the state. When he challenged an analysis of student outcomes in JCPS by the Kentucky Association of School Councils, Susan

[7] For more about CATS, see http://www.kde.state.ky.us/comm/commrel/cats/cats_summmary.asp and http://www.kde.state.ky.us/comm/commrel/cats/.

Weston, the director and an experienced statistician, re-ran the data using the school district's method. The trends and implications changed only slightly (JCPS later admitted it had been using an erroneous formula for at least nine years).[8]

The Association's report shows that JCPS experiences a 9th grade "bulge" far larger than the Kentucky average (21 percent compared to 7 percent). The 9th grade African-American student enrollment is 31 percent higher than in the previous 8th grade, or almost twice that of the state average. Could it be, asks Weston, that African-American students, especially males, are not prepared for 9th grade work and are being held back? And does that contribute to 29 percent fewer African-American male students in 12th grade, compared to 8th grade? And why, between 1997-2001, did African-American participation in self-contained classrooms for students with disabilities grow by 19 percent when white student participation did not change and such placements declined for every group in the rest of the state?

This is the type of data shared with parents in CIPL training, aimed at encouraging them to ask questions and hold schools accountable. However, at the district level, the same defensiveness seen in the accountability area also impacts efforts to increase parent involvement. Teachers and administrators cite weak parent support as one of their major problems, but the "lack of trust" toward the kinds of proactive parent participation organized by the Prichard Committee "is bigger in Louisville than any other place in the state," according to Beverly Raimondo, director of CIPL.

The issue is not a lack of effort. A Middle School Coalition, funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, brought parents, educators, and community leaders

[8] For more about the Kentucky Association of School Councils, see http://www.kasc.net/.

together to discuss issues and work on solutions.[9] With another Clark grant, the Prichard Committee trained parents through the Right Question Project, a national program to help parents use data and develop priorities for their children's education.[10] It also trained parent support coordinators for several Louisville middle grades schools, but the project was not as successful as had been hoped because the coordinators, for the most part, lacked authority or influence in their schools. The Committee adopted a *Supporting Our Kids* process and a *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* process,[11] both aimed at helping teachers and parents become more comfortable talking with each other about common concerns and action plans.

All of these attempts to create better working relationships between families and middle schools fell short. The impact of parents who had become better informed and able to influence school policies was diffused throughout the middle schools. Active parents lacked a strong, unified voice. The message of anemic academic progress in the middle grades failed to reach the community. School district leaders avoided a partnership mode with external groups, not rejecting the idea but certainly not embracing collaboration.

In 1998, the Prichard Committee staff, its national advisors on middle school parent involvement, and the Foundation decided on a strategy to widen the involvement of the Louisville community in middle school reform. Through a broadly representative Community Accountability Team (CAT), more community leaders would be involved in

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[9] For more on the Middle School Coalition, see http://www.middleweb.com/WT9LV.html.
[10] For more about the Right Question Project, see http://www.rightquestion.org/.
[11] For more about Parents and Teachers Talking Together, see http://www.prichardcommittee.org/pt3.html.

data gathering and discussions with JCPS leaders on improving achievement in the middle grades.[12]

The Evolution of CAT

One watching the story of CAT develop over its four-year existence might think of the effect of a pebble dropped into a pond. This small, solid object creates ripples that go far beyond where the pebble hits the water.

Starting from the parent contacts already developed in Louisville by the Prichard Committee, the person selected to head CAT, Lynn Rippy, added her contacts with youth service organizations, the faith community, and community leaders to create the 50-member CAT.[13] A former youth advisor for the mayor, Rippy had chaired the Middle School Coalition and was passionate about the issues affecting youth in the community, especially those not being served well by schools and other agencies. She believes that "this community will do anything you ask that rises above blame games." Her greatest challenge was to walk a very thin line between fostering external pressures on JCPS to address the achievement problems in middle grades and increasing JCPS wariness about being involved in the process at all. Ultimately, Rippy held the process together, long enough to have an impact.

CAT consisted of parents, researchers, school board members, business people, activists from community groups and JCPS middle grades central staff. The CIPL training was adapted to the special circumstances of Louisville's middle grades, and 21 of

[12] For more about the CAT, see http://www.prichardcommittee.org/cat/index.html.
[13] For more about Lynn Rippy, see http://www.middleweb.com/CSLV1Rippy.html.

the 50 members of CAT received CIPL training. Also signing up for CAT were some local members of the statewide Prichard Committee.

"CIPL involved parents with a direct interest in their local school," notes Bani Hines-Hudson, a CIPL graduate, CAT member, and a member of the Louisville Urban League. "CAT, however, brought together a more diverse group that was directly and indirectly related to schools. It provided a forum for the wider community to take the achievement gap more seriously. It was no longer just a parent thing."

Meeting four times a year, CAT focused on finding answers to five questions:

- What should students be learning?
- How well are they learning?
- What credible evidence is there that they are learning?
- What will happen if they don't learn what they should be learning?
- What changes will be made to make sure they do learn?

After a year of discussions and research, CAT members agreed on a strategy to look for answers themselves by "shadowing" administrators, teachers, and students in schools chosen because they were making progress and using what JCPS staff considered promising practices. CAT invited other members of the community to join in visiting five middle schools. The visiting teams received training in using a structured interview guide, and after a pilot run at one of the schools, the teams made half-day school visits in the fall and winter of 1999-2000. The team members then coded and analyzed the interview data.

A Louisville-based research and evaluation firm worked with Rippy and CAT members to refine and clarify the essence of the shadowing report. A professional editor

with experience writing about the Louisville middle schools, and CAT's external consultant, parent involvement expert Anne Henderson of Washington, D.C., shaped the stories and data into a colorful, readable, 12-page report to the Louisville community, *Every Child Counts.*[14] Rippy and JCPS Assistant Superintendent Sandy Ledford, who has responsibility for middle grades, jointly conducted the press conference when the report was released. More than 160 people from the community attended a luncheon following the release, an opportunity to not only highlight the report but also to let the attendees hear about a successful "no excuses" design for higher student achievement presented by the former superintendent of the Brazosport, Texas, school district.

Sidebar

Every Child Counts: Raising Student Achievement in the Middle Grades

presented achievement data, described "our schools on the move" and how they were addressing the individual needs of students (the fifth school, CAT team members decided, had stalled), and presented solutions and promising ideas for CAT's major recommendations: (1) hold high expectations for students at all achievement levels, (2) individualize instruction, and (3) build strong partnerships with families and community groups focused on raising student achievement.

The report also addressed two major barriers the CAT visits revealed—low student motivation and low expectations of those students. To remove both

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[14] To read *Every Child Counts*, see http://www.prichardcommittee.org/pubs/cat/every_child.pdf.

barriers, the report came down on the side of blending classes so that students of varying achievement levels were grouped in the same classroom. No more remedial classes, in most instances, it said. Although the report cited research and strategies to support blending, this issue dominated the headlines in coverage of the report and caused public criticism. Louisville is a community where affluent parents have considerable political leverage, and they have pressured district leaders to constantly reassure them that their children will have access to high-level magnets and special programs that incorporate tracking. This made the report's stance on academic tracking all the more bold.

Every Child Counts became a catalyst for CAT's further work in Louisville. In the long run, the controversy over its position on tracking probably drew more public attention to the report than if it had not challenged the status quo. As Rippy, her assistant Sheila Tasman, and CAT members distributed copies around Louisville and engaged schools and groups in discussing it, the overall message—that the community must guarantee that every student will achieve at a high level—gradually shaped people's interest.

Once people get the information, their involvement can be ratcheted up to the next level, Rippy says. "I've tried to keep the effort moving toward the power sources in the community," she explains. "They are caring but caught up in middle class issues. People have to see the big picture, hear the voices, and experience the messages in a very personal way. We need to keep pointing out that 'everyone can win here.' People will

protect the magnet schools, and if changes mean letting more black kids in, that will be okay. We need to keep talking about the kids. Thirty percent of youth in this community are not making it, and it is not necessary to make it a black-white issue. It needs to be about giving every child a chance to make it."

The Leadership Issue

Every Child Counts and CAT's continuing mobilization of public concern challenged the leadership of JCPS. Rippy had been careful to keep school district administrators informed about the development of the report, and CAT was advised by business leaders to maintain relationships with the district hierarchy.

Yet, the district's wariness about the report and CAT—the superintendent was noticeably absent from the celebration of the report's release--ignored deeply felt concerns about the achievement gap. The JCPS administration, for example, nixed a proposal from CAT that its members share the data and CAT report with every school-based decision making council in the middle schools. CAT members were told this would conflict with each school's efforts to improve achievement and result in "goal displacement." To keep peace, CAT staff and members masked their disappointment and made plans to achieve the same ends through other means.

As in many urban districts, JCPS' response to problems depends on where it believes the power structure is leaning. Moreover, bigness (or bureaucracy) often isolates central office leaders from the rich conversations about values and purposes that occur throughout the community.

Still, Sherry DeMarsh, now retired from the school system, does not let school district leaders off the hook. Formerly the JCPS middle school coordinator and a CAT member, De Marsh was the "bridge" between the school system and CAT. In these roles, she became acutely aware of where their agendas overlapped or diverged. Her conciliatory nature kept JCPS at the table, even though she personally wanted more action. Speaking candidly as a retired educator, she says that the belief system of the top leader "trickles down through the whole organization." A middle school principal before joining the JCPS central office staff, DeMarsh held to her values—that "the foundation of the schools should be to see that every child has the right to the best education you can offer." Though she had little support from administrators above her, her participation was essential to CAT because she was able to facilitate CAT's and the Prichard Committee's access to data and school district personnel.

DeMarsh believes "leaders model, and when the model isn't collaborative, efforts like CAT face a bigger challenge." She acknowledges that school district leaders are harried by myriad decisions every day, "but they need to frame the big ones to include developing trust." Because she worked on the trust issue, DeMarsh believes she gradually was marginalized within the district. "My work and influence kept getting narrower," she says, "because it was not valued or wanted."

As various groups around the Louisville community began to grapple with the information in the CAT report and delve into its issues, trust in the school district leadership began to erode. When Prichard Committee members from Louisville met with the JCPS school board, they learned that the superintendent, not the school board or community, developed a vision statement for the district. There had been no review of the

strategic plan for several years. Business members pushed for greater activism by the board. Also, the state education commissioner met with Prichard Committee members and stressed the importance of school board members monitoring results and holding their system accountable for improved achievement. These meetings led CAT to research the roles and responsibilities of school boards and use its findings to encourage the JCPS school board to play a more active leadership and oversight role.

Leadership to challenge school district policies also began to emerge from the minority community. When people are shut out, DeMarsh adds, "they often become a thorn in the side or they shut up." The latter response largely characterized the attitude of Louisville's African-American community for a long time, even though they had good reason to advocate for change. "No one is satisfied," says Bani Hines-Hudson, a graduate of the first CIPL training and a member of the steering committee for the Urban League's Campaign for African-American Achievement. "But there is a feeling of resignation…and a certain cynicism." And, she adds, "there is a lot of politeness in Louisville—and stabbing you in the back."

The response of the African-American community to *Every Child Counts* seemed muted, but many of its leaders were involved in the Louisville Urban League's own project.[15] Its preliminary report, *The State of African-American Youth in Metropolitan Louisville,* issued in 2002, covered some of the same problems as the CAT report, though it focused on older adolescents.[16] The steering committee included several CAT members. The Urban League, according to Hines-Hudson, was not known as a change agent, so its report "was a surprise to many." She anticipates that CAT, or its successor,

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[15] For more on the Louisville Urban League, see http://www.lul.org/whomap.htm.

will work with the Urban League and enlist others, such as faith communities, in challenging district policies and practices, especially, she says, teacher attitudes. This more militant African-American community was evident in the summer of 2002 when a community group sponsored a forum on tracking and racially disparate special education placements. "Come learn about how to combat and advocate for your children," the flyer urged. Among the panelists was Susan Weston, director of the Kentucky Association of School Councils, who had raised the issue of an increase in African-American assignments to special education in her analysis of JCPS data.

Sidebar

While CAT pushed the school district to pay attention to the achievement gap, it also involved its members and other CIPL-trained parents in support for the schools. One CIPL parent, for example, developed and raised money for a summer reading program in a neighborhood that sent students to her children's middle school (even though all her children had graduated). The Prichard Committee coordinator in Louisville divided her time between CIPL and CAT, creating a cross-fertilization of informed parents and projects focused on the issues raised by CAT. Among the projects:

- *Use of the* Turn Up the Volume *project*[17] *at two middle schools. Student forums at one school asked students who lived in the neighborhood zone how to improve parent involvement; at the other school, students were*

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[16] To read *The State of African-American Youth in Louisville*, see http://www.lul.org/StateofAfricanAmericanYouth.htm.

asked for their responses to a new effort to individualize instruction. In both schools, students and teachers were trained on scientific research principles and planned the forums together. The information from the forums was shared with the school communities.

- *About 25 volunteers from CAT and other groups served as Book Buddies in five middle schools, giving struggling 6th grade readers one-on-one contact with an adult reader on a regular basis.*
- *Several CAT members made a two-day visit to Barren County Middle School, a national model,*[18] *and discussions with its teachers and principal led to the adoption of that school's Different Ways of Knowing*[19] *(an individualized education approach that de-tracks classes) at three Louisville middle schools.*
- *One middle school's experiment with student-led conferences*[20] *was the basis of a guide for other schools, which was posted on the CAT web site through the Prichard Committee.*
- *CAT staff member Sheila Tasman organized a major forum for the civic-minded National Council of Jewish Women focused on the issues raised by CAT.*

Louisville's business community, once winning national recognition for its unwavering support of an integrated city-county school system, had not been involved in

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[17] For more about Turn Up the Volume, see http://www.pfks.org/toolkits/toolkit1.html.
[18] To take a virtual tour of Barren County Middle School, see http://www.schoolstowatch.org/barrencounty/
[19] For more about Different Ways of Knowing, see http://www.dwoknet.galef.org/.

advocating for change for a long time. It had supported a major infusion of computer technology in the schools, and individual businesses such as United Parcel Service and Humana sponsored projects, and the business community volunteered to be shadowed by 7th graders throughout the district. It shied away, however, from active support for school reform, preferring to go along with the school district's emphasis on preserving a "market share" of school-age youth in Louisville. The media in Louisville tended to agree with this attitude, even telling activists that the "data war" among the superintendent, external groups, and the State Department of Education ought to be settled privately.

The information flow developed by CAT, however, made the status quo uncomfortable for many. Two years into the CAT project, its business contacts advised CAT that "the business community is not yet ready to do battle." A year later, however, after more and more groups had time to digest the CAT report, different attitudes emerged. One influential business leader who served on the Prichard Committee commented that the local committee members wanted to "get JCPS more interested in ALL children. JCPS is saying it but does not mean it."

Like feeling an elephant blindfolded, people involved with the school district, the business community, CAT, and the Urban League viewed CAT's activities differently. Some thought CAT made great progress, others wished it had affected student achievement more directly. CAT membership fluctuated across four years, but a core of about 20 people remained steady. Probably no one involved with it could count all of the ripples it created or how far they went. There were conversations never recorded, networks never fully documented, important meetings not on anyone's schedule. Yet,

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[20] To learn more about student led conferences, see http://www.prichardcommittee.org/pubs/cat/student-led_conferences.pdf.

these quiet interactions converged with the overt work of CAT to produce support for stronger leadership focused on the issues raised by CAT—leadership by the community, by the school board, and by the school system central office. CAT began as an effort to mobilize parents and community members to partner with schools around the issue of student achievement in the middle grades. It evolved into a focused effort to improve leadership.

CAT pushed the JCPS student performance data into the public consciousness, says Wade Mountz, a retired hospital administrator who chaired the state Prichard Committee and was an active CAT member. "At first," he says, "it seemed like a lot of wing flapping and not much flying, but the idea was to keep turning up the heat. CAT could do this because of the people involved with it." He believes the hook for persuading the business community to address the achievement gap—and the leadership issue—will be an obvious one: the need for an educated workforce.

That hook appeared sooner than expected. A few months before the Clark Foundation grant for CAT expired, a prestigious study of the upcoming merger of Louisville and Jefferson County governments embraced almost all of what CAT represented. The Brookings Institution report, *Beyond Merger: A Competitive Vision for the Regional City of Louisville,* praised the school district for trying to maintain racial balance and for making progress on state accountability measures.[21]

Nevertheless, it said, the metro Louisville workforce lacked the education needed to place the region in a "knowledge economy," largely because of "serious gaps" between the academic performance of white and African-American students, including college-

[21] To read *Beyond Merger*, see http://www.brook.edu/dybdocroot/es/urban/louisville/abstract.htm.

going rates. The school district's efforts, it said, must shift to "pulling up the achievement of lower-achieving students."

Moreover, the Brookings study recommended that the new regional government empanel a Prichard Committee-like group of citizens, parents, and business leaders to advocate for better education outcomes. It would identify problems, monitor and assess district performance, boost parental involvement, and organize community-based organizations around education reforms. The superintendent said he would welcome such a move.

CAT's Legacy and Place

Those involved in the planning and implementation of CAT couch most of the lessons learned in terms of personal leadership. "Find a really committed leader with connections," advises Beverly Raimondo, the Prichard Committee's CIPL director, and "support grassroots leaders who have time to do the hard work. Community leaders can carry the messages, but they are not going to spend the time to do the tough stuff."

Carol Edelen, the Prichard Committee CIPL coordinator in Louisville, looks for parent leaders willing to challenge the attitude that "this is the way it always has been," such as on academic tracking. She and Raimondo agree that anyone involved in being an external change agent must know how to collect, interpret and use data. At the same time, says Raimondo, "you should always be upfront and honest with the school system about what you are doing. This means you need someone on the inside to be a liaison."

Lynn Rippy, from her perspective as a community activist, advises that any such effort needs to find the power base and work hard to gain its trust. "You should share

your information, making sure it is accurate," she says, "and be ready to support community leadership when it is ready to move."

The slow, steady development of informed leadership in Louisville may seem too "nice" to education reform advocates in many urban districts, but Rippy contends that "parents want positive relationships with schools."

Parents everywhere, she says, also share the same desire to have their children succeed in school. CAT's efforts to help Louisville parents by mobilizing the community parallel a growing movement in this country between parent and community organizers to demand better schools. A study by the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University[22] estimates that more than 200 local efforts are putting external pressure on public schools, now aided by the reporting requirements of the new federal No Child Left Behind act.

While protest is an American tradition, organizing for better schools began in earnest about a decade ago. Some efforts are spontaneous, but as with CAT, most tend to be well organized and linked to larger organizing efforts (such as the Prichard Committee). CAT resembles these other efforts in other ways, based on the NYU study. They depend on creating good relationships with someone or groups of administrators and teachers within the school system, but always aware of the tension caused by being both a friend and a critic. They fight for legitimacy against official district policies and behaviors that often try to marginalize them. They build a base for change on genuine community issues.

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[22] For more about the Institute for Education and Social Policy, see http://www.nyu.edu/iesp/.

Another new study, by the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, also supports CAT's work.[23] Based on documentation of education organizing in five districts, it makes a connection between community organizing and improved student learning. Its summary of the relationship of community capacity building to school improvement could be the epitaph for CAT:

> *"When educators, parents, community members, and politicians feel mutually accountable, finding solutions to the problems of urban schools becomes a collective responsibility, lessening the tendency of parents and educators to blame each other for school failure and those within school and political bureaucracies to dodge their responsibilities. This process creates the political will that enables community organizing groups to forward issues of equity and school/community connection and bring new influences to bear on school climate and curriculum and instruction."*

As Bani Hines-Hudson, CIPL and CAT parent and Urban League activist, said: "I can always hear complaints about the schools in my community, but to know that other people care is very important."

[2323] For more about the Cross City Campaign study, see http://www.crosscity.org/programs/indicators/findings.htm.

Date: August 23, 2002

To: Community Accountability Team Members
Louisville Prichard Committee Members

From: Beverly Derington Moore, Member
Community Accountability Team

Subject: Lewis/Mizell Report

There are some good points in Anne Lewis report on the Community Accountability Team. Especially, there are valuable recommendations from the CAT team about the need for School Board leadership, community involvement, and changes in instruction.

Unfortunately, there are some serious problems with this report that undercut the credibility of the report and that demand correction for the sake of the important collaborative work of the Prichard Committee, the CAT Team, and the Jefferson County Public Schools. Since Ms. Lewis is a respected education writer, one would expect careful data gathering and supporting evidence for her conclusions. I am sure that is her usual procedure, but it is not apparent in this report.

I will only highlight the major problems with a few examples for this memo, but I will be glad to discuss the problems in more detail, if needed.

1. **Some information in the report is simply incorrect and demonstrates a lack of accurate knowledge of the Jefferson County Public Schools and the CAT Team.** For example:
   a. The statement "Most minority students attend central city schools…" indicates a lack of familiarity with Jefferson County schools. Of the 31,600 Black students in the district, 7,882 attend schools in the central city (including the West End). That is 25%, not most.
   b. Lewis stated "gerrymandering of school zones has created pockets of severely disadvantaged schools." Although there are schools with predominantly disadvantaged student bodies, that problem is hardly due to "gerrymandering." An examination of the school assignment maps and the history of assignment changes demonstrates that any gerrymandering has been to create more diverse student bodies. The concentration of high poverty students in some schools is due primarily to housing patterns that have not been overcome by the "controlled choice" student assignment plan.

2. **The emphasis in the report regarding the JCPS response to the achievement gap is misleading.** For example:
   a. Several paragraphs are devoted to the achievement gap between black and white students that is "tolerated" in Jefferson County as though that were an unusual or outstanding difference between Jefferson County and the rest of the state or nation. As educators know the effects of race on student achievement are confounded with the effects of poverty. Although there are some Kentucky schools that have made great progress in spite of student poverty, an extensive study by Phil Roeder (Univ. of KY) has demonstrated, those schools are the exception. He found most schools that were disadvantaged and low scoring before KERA are still low scoring and poverty has a strong negative effect on achievement scores. Since most poor minority children live in Jefferson and Fayette Counties, the effects of poverty on minority students can be expected to be most evident in those counties. Fayette has a comparable achievement gap for its lower number of minority and poor students. This is not to infer that the achievement gap is not serious and should not be

addressed, but progress should be measured within the context of state and national trends.

b. The word "tolerates" implies that JCPS has not been concerned about the achievement gap when, in fact, addressing low achievement has been an emphasis in JCPS for years.

c. Lewis infers that the minority community has been inactive in challenging the district policies or in attention to the achievement gap until the CAT report. A review of the Courier-Journal for reports of the activities and comments by the minority school board member Ann Elmore, the Alliance Against Racial and Political Repression, the Rev. Louis Coleman, Parents Involved in Education, Senator Gerald Neal, and many others would dispel that misperception.

d. Although the CAT Team has helped to publicize the problems of the achievement gap, it did not initiate the issue as inferred. The CAT Team chose the achievement gap issue for study because the problem was already of common concern when our work began

3. **Repeatedly, only one point of view is reported without verification of the legitimacy of the comments or exploring other viewpoints, which is a standard procedure in education research.** For example, she states "school district leaders avoided a partnership mode with external groups." That is definitely a strange interpretation when two school board members were part of the CAT Team, one very active, and the Assistant Superintendent for Middle Schools and her staff were constantly involved and provided most of the data and much expertise for the Team. If she has interviewed JCPS administrators, she could have learned about extensive collaboration with external groups such as the Urban League, 100 Black Men, and local businesses.

4. **Although the exaggeration may be gratifying to those responsible for the funding for CAT, the report overstates the influence of the CAT team.** Many of the accomplishments cited are due completely or primarily to the efforts of other groups, such as JCPS or the Urban League. None of CAT's accomplishments would have been possible without the cooperation and help of JCPS staff. This overstatement is not only misleading, but it distracts from the real accomplishments of the CAT Team-- its shadowing project report, its help in involving community people in Book Buddies, and its thoughtful recommendation from subsequent interviews and activities that the school board should be more active in monitoring school achievement.

5. **The report ignores the important barriers to the effectiveness of the CAT team—primarily lack of adequate funding for adequate staff**. Beverly Raimondo, of the Prichard Committee is quoted, " Community leaders can carry the messages, but they are not going to spend the time to do the tough stuff." But the implication of the remark--the need for additional paid staff--is not addressed. Due to the dedicated efforts of the few staff members, the CAT team accomplished a great deal considering its lack of funding for adequate staff. But the goal of true widespread involvement of parents and the community in holding schools accountable is going to require more than the limited amount of time available from part-time staff and 20 volunteers.

A Personal Response to
Anne C. Lewis' Report
The Community Accountability Team in Louisville:
Waking a Sleeping Giant

by
Sherry DeMarsh

Prepared for the Community Accountability Team members

August 20, 2002

My retirement from the Jefferson County Public School System concluding my twenty-eight years of service became official on April 1, 2002. Since that date, I have continued my commitment to JCPS through a JCPS/higher education collaboration that supports preparation of certified middle and high school teachers through an alternative certification path. My ties with JCPS have taken a different form, but the commitment to the District, its administration and teachers, and most importantly its students remains as strong today as it did at the start of my career in 1974.

I call this personal history to your attention as the backdrop for my passionate and straightforward remarks that follow. The passion is a result of my thorough and repeated readings of Anne C. Lewis' report, "The Community Accountability Team in Louisville: Waking a Sleeping Giant," distributed this week to Community Accountability Team (CAT) members followed by subsequent telephone conversations with both Ms. Anne Lewis and the Clark Foundation CAT funding source, Mr. Hayes Mizell.

Having served with many Jefferson County Public School and community representatives as a regular CAT committee member since its inception, I found the report filled with many contradictions. At first glance, Ms. Lewis' CAT report seemed informative in nature. However, with further reading, it became obvious her text was actually a skillfully crafted "editorial".

Ideally, one might consider the Community Accountability Team (CAT) voice a "common" voice. After all, it began as a collaborative venture with JCPS and the community. To the contrary, this report does not paint a collaborative picture for me as a reader; it paints a divisive one. I found the report filled with clearly articulated innovation and support for the "community" side of the CAT partnership. Conversely, I found the report void of valid and pertinent views expressed by the "district" side.

Several of the outcomes noted in the Sidebar on page 16-17 were facilitated by and developed as an outgrowth of District advocacy and leadership. For example:

- the Turn Up the Volume Project was organized through Assistant Superintendent Sandy Ledford's office with interested middle school principals
- the Book Buddy Program was created by a former middle school teacher and

orchestrated by the persistent coordination and enthusiasm of Susan Shortt through her central office position as Middle School Coalition Coordinator

- the acquisition of the Galef Institute's Different Ways of Knowing grant for Myers, Westport, and Highland Middle Schools was awarded to JCPS as a result of a previously developed collaboration with Sandy Ledford, JCPS Middle School Principals, and Susan Galetti (Galef Institute) formed in earlier grant work involving the National Association of Secondary School Principals staff and JCPS middle level principals. In fact, Susan Galetti has publicly acknowledged that her faith in the top- level leadership at JCPS positively influenced the award of the DWoK middle level research opportunity to these three highly committed Jefferson County middle schools.

Contrary to Ms. Lewis' assertions, the JCPS administration actively supported the CAT efforts. Dr. Sandy Ledford, a member of the top level JCPS administration, regularly participated in the opening ceremonies of the Commonwealth Institute sessions and publicly advocated for this program with principals and all others looking for an excellent model for engaging parents in student achievement issues. As the Superintendent's representative, she regularly attended CAT functions and persistently advocated for a communication loop among CAT and JCPS leaders. Superintendent Stephen Daeschner empowered Dr. Ledford and her staff to serve as integral partners in this vital CAT collaboration venture. He often commented about the issues brought to the CAT table as ones already identified as student achievement priorities by the District.

Normally I would not make such an intentional point about the District's role in this collaborative CAT venture. After all, in a truly synergistic collaboration, the work of the group is only as strong as the contributions of its individual parts. However, I've struggled to find a collaborative voice in Ms. Lewis' report. In fact, I saw no mention that for many CAT meetings JCPS staff representation exceeded the total participants from the "community side". I saw no mention of the many hours of support provided by District staff members for the Prichard Committee Commonwealth Institute weekend meetings. I saw no mention that JCPS top level administrators invited Prichard Committee leadership to present their program and recruit CIPL participants at Parent University twice each year and at the annual JCPS Showcase of Schools each fall. I saw no mention of JCPS staff participation in the review of CIPL participants' school-based projects, a culminating component of the CIPL experience. I saw no mention of many hours of conversation and planning between JCPS and CAT leadership determined to build a collaborative

process that focused on our common priority - academic success for all children in the JCPS community. As well, I saw no mention of the earnest and sincere conversations held by JCPS and CAT leadership over the challenges we face in achieving that shared priority and the heart wrenching concern felt for those children not yet experiencing academic success. I saw no mention of JCPS, Prichard Committee, and CAT leadership revisiting the merit of our collaborative CAT design and recommitting to our shared belief that meaningful change will only occur when it is owned and supported by all parties.

In my subsequent telephone call with the author, Ms. Lewis, I ask her about the negative tone I detected in the report. According to Ms. Lewis, she interviewed numerous community members for this report and indicated that no positive responses emerged. I then asked about responses from JCPS CAT representatives. Ms. Lewis then informed me that no JCPS staff interviews were conducted. I find that decision extremely problematic if in fact the report crafted was intended to portray an accurate and complete picture of our collaborative community/school district partnership.

I have worked with Ms. Lewis for over a decade as she has written numerous reports for Mr. Hayes Mizell regarding middle school reform in Clark supported districts. Previously, I found her to be professional, trustworthy, and a person I considered a professional colleague and friend. Over the course of our years of collaboration initiated by our Clark connection, Ms. Lewis and I have often shared concerns, issues, and challenges related to middle level reform openly and freely. Interviews with Ms. Lewis were more like a conversation between professional friends. Over the course of a decade, Ms. Lewis recognized that regardless of the challenge or frustration I might feel, I always came back to a "glass half full" perspective and moved forward to face a challenge. In fact, she acknowledged that at the conclusion of the late afternoon chat we had for this report.

For this interview, however, I believe she chose to selectively focus on a perspective that best suited the pattern of "District" negativity she was developing in her report. I find her out-of-context commentary attributed to me totally unrelated to the report topic. In fact, I shared many ideas ; with Ms. Lewis that I believed challenged the effectiveness of the CAT team. Not a single one of those thoughts was quoted or even mentioned in this report.

In all honesty, I do think a great deal was learned about the challenges of collaboration from the Community Accountability experience. Ms. Lewis shared on page 9 paragraph 2 that:

Lynn Rippy's greatest challenge was to walk a very thin line between fostering external pressures on JCPS to address the achievement problems in middle grades and increasing JCPS wariness about being involved in the process at all.

Ms. Rippy certainly remained committed to the spirit of collaboration. In retrospect, the underlying tension Ms. Rippy alluded to throughout this work was a likely result of the determination for continued collaboration that existed between CAT leadership and JCPS staff. An example of the challenges faced in this collaboration are evidenced in Ms. Lewis' failure to seek district perspective for this report and any related positives that occurred as a result of this collaboration commitment.

Perhaps the real crux of the CAT "community" and "district" challenge is the real agenda behind the Clark funding of this project noted on page 2 paragraph 2. Ms. Lewis states:

In these efforts, CAT was, so to speak, the "culminating activity" of the Foundation - an organization funded by Clark but independent of the district and outside its control.

Perhaps CATs success or lack of it generates from a deeply rooted disconnect between the Clark Foundation's outside the District control" charge and the collaborative working style of those implementing the project. For several years, JCPS leadership has worked to conduct its business within a collaborative relationship with the Community Accountability Team. Maybe the Clark Foundation believes that working independently of the district and outside its control is the ONLY way to approach this vital work. Perhaps the Foundation expected the CAT members to serve as an oversight group for the District rather than a collaborative partner. Whatever the intention of the Foundation, this report will certainly test the strength of the collaborative spirit between the CAT and JCPS from this point forward.

It's unfortunate that unmet common goals for increased student achievement often evolve into adult frustration, finger pointing, and ego- based win-lose scenarios. While this diversion strategy may provide momentary relief for those not working daily with children in schools, it simply exacerbates problems that

hinder any hope for success among people who lack trust in one another and the collective spirit necessary to establish and achieve common goals.

As I mentioned earlier, I no longer work within the Jefferson County Public School system. I do, however, collaborate regularly in support of quality teacher preparation and certification and continue to advocate and support all members of the J CPS team.

In my professional opinion, Ms. Lewis' report commissioned by Mr. Hayes Mizell portrayed an incomplete, biased, and intentionally divisive summary of the work attempted by a group of people sincerely trying to make a positive difference in JCPS middle level student achievement. I believe the design of Ms. Lewis' data gathering and research made that result predictable and perhaps predetermined. I think the challenge for continued collaboration will be greatly impeded as a result of this report. From a personal perspective, I feel the author manipulated my out-of-context reflection, my blind trust in the writer, my respect for the leadership of the Clark Foundation, and my personal credibility as a veteran middle level educator in this district as a tool to cast dispersions on the "top level leadership" of the Jefferson County Public Schools.

In twenty-eight years of service to the Jefferson County Public Schools I have openly expressed my opinions and sometimes disagreed with District leadership. However, at no time as a District employee would my opinions, conflicting attitudes, or beliefs ever take precedent over my deep commitment to JCPS leaders, school staffs, the community-at-large, and our common mission of educating all children. Those who truly know me will agree that having the title -RETIRED next to my name has in no way altered that conviction.

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